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AUTHOR Stock, Janet C.
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ABSTRACT

A business French course developed at Utah State University was designed to meet the students' need for knowledge of the specialized vocabulary and expressions in a French-speaking business environment. These vocabulary needs include language for use at work, in daily living, and in employment-seeking. A business French text was chosen and supplemented with handouts. Class discussion and exercises focused on developing the needed language skills and knowledge. All written activities were controlled exercises in which students carefully followed written models and chose from a list the necessary formulas for acceptable business correspondence. The two oral assignments included one individual and one group presentation. In the individual task, students presented articles they had chosen on a business- or economics-related topic. At the end of the semester, small groups created and presented to the class their own imaginary businesses. Problems encountered in implementing the course included selecting a text, the attitude of students trained by other methods toward studying serious topics in French, administrative and faculty apathy toward foreign language learning in general and toward developing marketable skills in students, and lack of adequate time for the course. (MSE)

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RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY OF A BUSINESS FRENCH COURSE: BLAZING NEW TRAILS

by

Janet C. Stock
Assistant Professor of French

Utah State University
Logan, Utah 84322-0720

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RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY OF A BUSINESS FRENCH COURSE: BLAZING NEW TRAILS

Although there has been an increased awareness nationwide of the need for developing university courses designed to teach the specialized vocabulary and stylistic skills of the French business world, a few states have yet to make any significant effort in this direction. The State of Utah is one of these. Utah State University, a land-grant university with federally-funded research projects in French-speaking countries, is just beginning to realize the potential for such training for its faculty and students involved in these projects.

Prior to beginning my retraining programs in business French, I interviewed the director of a substantial range management research project and his secretary. This project has been operating for years in Morocco. They expressed dismay over the inability of the staff and students to communicate effectively with the Moroccans involved in the project. Even those staff and students who had completed many years of general coursework in French at the university level and had been to France did not have the linguistic skills and command of vocabulary required for dealing with these French-speaking businessmen. They were surprised to learn that the French business world has its own vocabulary and expressions which are not usually taught in the traditional university or high school

French course, and they urged me to establish a course that would provide this kind of training. In response to this need, I presented a course in business French at USU in Spring Quarter of 1987. This was the first course of this kind to be presented in the State of Utah. Other courses at USU have included some vocabulary and general concepts about business and one even presents the computer and its uses in the French-speaking world. None, however, has ever been devoted entirely to business French before.

This course is built on the premise that anyone wishing to work or even just live in a French-speaking country for a period of time needs to know the specialized vocabulary and expressions he will encounter at work, at the store, at the bank, at the post office, and so on. He also needs to be acquainted with the organization and functioning of French businesses, and their relationship with the government. He should also be able to perform the kinds of tasks that any educated citizen needs to do: writing checks, applying for a job, writing a resume, corresponding with businesses, filing an insurance complaint, etc. The purpose of this course is not to create experts in the field of business but to help the students learn to function like any educated French citizen.

The text used in the course was French for Business: Le Francais des Affaires by Claude Le Goff (Paris: Hatier, 1986). This book is intended to prepare students to take the exams offered by the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris, but

it also provides a well-written and well-organized introduction to business French in general. This book was chosen because the vocabulary and business concepts are incorporated into texts that can be readily understood by third-year French students and are also presented in a narrative form designed to hold their interest. The students could easily identify with the main character: an American student with an MBA working on an internship in a French firm in order to learn the French system. This character asks the kinds of questions the students would need to ask in a similar situation. Through the conversations between this person and the French people around him, the students not only learn the basic facts about the French system but also the similarities and differences between the French and American systems.

The text also contains supplemental readings drawn from authentic business publications. Most of these are too difficult for third-year students to read, but they would be very useful for classes with advanced students with considerable business expertize or classes of businessmen and women. After each chapter in the book, there is a set of vocabulary exercises based upon actual past exams given by the Chambre de Commerce de Paris. These were assigned to the students as homework and then they were corrected in class. These proved to be quite difficult because the style is more that of authentic business French; whereas, the readings present business concepts in a more conversational style.

During the class discussions, the students received several handouts with additional information and exercises to perform. These were drawn from a variety of sources and were designed to help the students understand the concepts presented by the text and to provide them with the opportunity of practicing writing important business documents. During the discussion on the bank and its services, the students received more detailed information about how to write a French check[1] and were given two blank checks to fill out. One of these had the amount and the receiver specified,[2] but the students were to fill out the other one imagining this information.[3] During the discussion on commercial correspondence, the students were given a form showing where the various parts of a commercial letter are placed on the page and then they were given a sample letter and instructed to rewrite the letter changing the wording only slightly and placing all of the parts of the letter in the correct position on the page. The students were then given a list of the correct formulas to use and were asked to choose other expressions to substitute for those in the model.[4] When the discussion centered around writing letters of application for a job and resumes, the students were given advertisements of job openings taken from current issues of Le Monde and a model letter of application with a resume.[5] They were then asked to chose a job that fit their qualifications, to write a letter applying for it and to attach a resume of their qualifications to the letter. From this exercise, the students learned not only how to apply

for a job in French but also what kinds of jobs are available in France and what kinds of skills potential workers need to have in order to find one there.

When the discussion centered around the form and organization of French businesses, the students were given handouts with schematic representations to help them learn the various legal forms.[6] They also played a game in which six students were chosen to represent six different French or American firms. The rest of the class had to guess the companies represented by the students by asking questions about the legal form of the firm, the number and the responsability of the partners, the ease of liquidation, the kind of management, the kind of commercial activities, the site of the home office, the number of workers, and the extent of the markets.[7] Only famous firms like IBM and Renaud and a few well-known local firms were used so that the students did not have any trouble guessing the names of the businesses.

As the students studied about the purchasing department, they copied model letters for making an offer to sell merchandise, sending a letter asking for further information, and a letter ordering items.[8] When the class discussed the sales department, the students received a handout explaining the various stages of a sale,[9] and practiced filling out a packing slip and a bill.[10] During the discussion of importation and exportation, they learned what balance of payments means[11] and how imported goods are paid for with a letter of exchange.[12]

While discussing the accounting department, the students also learned what a balance sheet is.[13] While studying the services of the PTT (post office), the students also learned how postal checks work and how to fill out a money order.[14] During the discussion of the stock exchange, they learned the difference between stocks and bonds.[15]

While reading about how French insurance companies function, the students were given a sample letter for submitting a claim to an insurance company for an automobile accident.[16] They were asked to imagine another accident and rewrite the letter changing the details. This was the most creative writing project of the quarter with the students' making up fantastic "accidents;" some located in France, others in the students' hometowns, some with multiple fatalities (including the claim writer for one) and others with minor damage and no injuries. The students included diagrams to illustrate the circumstances surrounding the "accident."

All of these written activities were practical applications of the theoretical concepts the students were learning. All were controlled exercises with the students carefully following models and choosing, from a list, the necessary formulas for acceptable business correspondence in French.

The students were given only controlled writing exercises for two reasons. First, the course was only one quarter long and was not concentrated on business correspondence, and so the

students did not have sufficient time to become familiar enough with these formulas in order to use them in freer writing exercises. Secondly, because there is such a difference between French and English in tone, in approach, and in the use of language in business correspondence and because these students had had very little or no background in French business correspondence, it was felt that they needed to spend what little time they had for writing developing a feel for proper French business correspondence; otherwise, they would likely revert to English letter-writing techniques which would not be acceptable.

In addition to these writing and reading assignments, the students were given two oral assignments--one to be given individually and the other in a group. Each student was asked to present to the class an article he had read on a business or economics related topic. The article could be drawn from the supplementary readings in the text, from the business section of the Journal Francais d'Amerique, or from some other business source. A foreign student from Mauritania, who is working for an oil-producing company, explained the organization and operation of his company to the group. Another foreign student from Senegal explained an article on the use of computers in agricultural engineering taken from one of her Senegalese textbooks. Another student, also interested in computers, explained how the MiniTel system functions and is being used in France. Other students talked about subsidiaries of French firms in the U.S., about the increasing interest in the stock market

among the French, and other very current topics. Through these reports, the students became much more aware of the extent and importance of the French business world in France, in relation to the American business world, and in the international community. They began to appreciate France as a nation of creative thinkers and producers of high technology, of researchers on the frontiers of knowledge, and not just as producers of "accordions, berets, wine, and cheese."

The final oral assignment of the quarter was for the students to work together in groups and imagine their own businesses. They had to decide the product they would make, or the service they would provide, the legal form of the firm, its location, how it would be financed for its short-term and its long-term needs, where it would sell, to whom, and why, the kind of advertising it would use and why, the organization of the company, its divisions, departments, and factories, what insurance it would carry and why, if it would export goods or not, the means of shipping goods, and so on. The students spent a week meeting in their groups to plan their companies. Then they presented them to the entire class in lieu of a final exam. In these presentations, the students brought together all of the material they had learned throughout the quarter, and applied it to their own firms. The students enjoyed playing "entrepreneur" and creating their own businesses, and they were very creative, especially in their advertising. Some presented dramatisations for television advertising their firm, others showed ads for

magazines and newspapers. One group imagined a jewelry store, another tourist visits of Paris by hot air baloon, another a health-food restaurant, a consumer journal, and so on. They were graded on the completeness of their presentation, their knowledge of business French, their willingness to participate, and their enthusiasm. All students did well in all categories, and their presentations were generally entertaining and informative even if they were not as complete as they might have been. They displayed a fundamental knowledge of business French which revealed that they had benefited from the course. The students were graded on the written assignments (20%), the oral assignments (20%), and the vocabulary and structure tests which were given during the quarter (60%).

In preparing and implementing this course, I encountered several problems. The most difficult problem was choosing a text which would fit into the quarter system (10 weeks), would appeal to students of varied backgrounds in business and varied abilities in French, and yet would provide solid information in an entertaining and lively manner. Most texts are either too general in subject matter and thus they are really French culture texts with a little business vocabulary added, or they are very theoretical in nature, too long to be covered in ten weeks, and not appealing to students, or else they are so firmly situated in the French culture that the students can not see parallels between their own culture and the French and can not see themselves involved in the French system in any way. The Le Goff

text seemed to provide the best solution to this problem.

Another difficult problem was student attitude. Because these students had been trained in French through the natural method, TPR, role-playing, and other activity-oriented methods, they were not accustomed to studying serious subjects in French. Many wanted to be entertained rather than learn about the French business world. They thoroughly enjoyed the creative activities they were given but balked at the task of learning new, specialized vocabulary. One student stated that he felt like he was back in French 101. The students seemed reluctant to admit that their vocabularies were limited and, as a result, were unwilling to expand them. They also seemed unwilling to change their attitudes about France preferring to keep their stereotyped images in tact.

The most frustrating problem to overcome, however, and one that continues today, is the apathy of the university administrators and most faculty, especially in the business field, towards the importance of learning foreign languages in general and especially of increasing the marketability of their students by preparing them to enter the international job market. In spite of the fact that Utah has a substantial Spanish-speaking population, and that the Mormon Church (the dominant religion) trains thousands of missionaries in foreign languages before sending them abroad, university officials and business leaders statewide still do not see foreign language training and especially specialized training for business and the

professions as an essential part of the education of the leaders of the future. The course described in this paper had to be presented under an existing course number assigned to a seminar and was labelled "Seminar in French Literature" in the catalog and in the bulletin. This caused considerable difficulties with students who thought they were signing up for a literature course and were not pleased that they would be learning business French! Yet, they were not able to change their registration because of class conflicts. I have been working since early fall to get this course accepted as a regular part of the university curriculum with its own number and accurate title. I just found out recently that it has finally been accepted.

The last problem which still needs to be solved is the lack of sufficient time devoted to this course. One quarter is simply not enough time to accomplish the modest goals set for this course and certainly not to adequately prepare the students for taking the Chambre de Commerce exams-which I would like to do in the future. As has been noted earlier, there is not enough time for developing writing skills for business correspondance. Nor is there time to develop telephone skills which are an essential part of the business world. There is also not adequate time to delve deeply enough into some topics, such as the role of the French government in the business world or the economic situation in France. The course needs to be at least two quarters or one semester long in order to do justice to the subject matter and to benefit the students. Certainly the trails

to Utah business French have not yet been completed, but they have at least been begun!

NOTES

1. Taken from Michel Danilo et al., Le Francais Commercial (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1985) 87.

2. Taken from Claude Le Goff, French for Business: Le Francais des Affaires (Paris: Hatier International, 1986) 11.

3. Taken from Denise Guback, Francais Commercial: Theorie et Correspondance (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1984) 61.

4. Guback, 23, 35-36.

5. Taken from Jeannette D. Bragger and Donald B. Rice, Allons-Y: Le Francais par etapes (Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle, Inc., 1984) 455, and Le Monde 17 mars, 1987, dern. ed.: 23-37, and Le Monde 18 mars, 1987, dern. ed.: 24-34.

6. Danilo, 6, 14-15.

7. Taken from a handout prepared by participants in the intensive seminar in teaching business French held at the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris in the summer of 1985.

8. Guback, 62-63, 71-72.

9. Danilo, 51.

10. Guback, 135-137.

11. Danilo, 148-149.

12. Guback, 11.

13. Danilo, 107.

14. Guback, 41-42, 44-46.

15. Danilo, 96-97.

16. Le Goff, 97-99.

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